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REQUIREMENTS AND STANDARDS. ABSTRACT OF A TALK AT ADE'S MLA MEETING ON THE 1965 PROPOSALS ADOUT THE PH.D.

BY- BARBER, C.L.

ASSOCIATION OF DEPARTMENTS OF ENGLISH, NEW YORK,NY

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CHAIRMEN AT THE ASSOCIATION OF DEPARTMENTS OF ENGLISH MEETING DISCUSSED THE 1965 PROPOSALS FOR THE PH.D. AND ATTEMPTED TO CONVEY THAT A PH.D. PROGRAM CAN PREPARE A STUDENT TO BE A TEACHER AND A SCHOLAR WITHOUT INCLUDING REQUIREMENTS APPROPRIATE ONLY FOR THE RELATIVELY SMALL GROUP WHO WILL BE DEVOTED PRIMARILY TO RESEARCH AND WRITING. THE LENGTH AND SCOPE OF THE DISSERTATION WAS A MAJOR AREA OF CONCERN. EXCEPT FOR THE RECOMMENDATION TO REQUIRE ONLY ONE FOREIGN LANGUAGE, ALL OF THE RESOLUTIONS WERE MATTERS OF EMPHASIS. THE ANXIETY OVER REDUCED REQUIREMENTS MAY BE DIMINISHED IF THE IMPORTANT DISTINCTION BETWEEN REQUIREMENTS AND STANDARDS IS REMEMBERED. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE ADE BULLETIN," NUMBER 6, JANUARY 1966, PAGES 2-4. (BN)

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REQUIREMENTS AND STANDARDS:

Abstract of a Talk at ADE's MLA Meeting on the 1965 Proposals about the Ph. D.,

by C. L. Barber, Indiana University

The Chairmen of English departments who conferred and resolved about the Ph. D. last June concluded our meeting by wryly drafting two of us who do not have doctorates (Mr. Whittemore and Mr. Barber) to speak on doctoral programs at this MLA meeting of ADE. Since the doctorate is a true rite of passage, a process which changes your name, one's attitude is bound to be affected by one's relationship to it. I tell myself I could have taken one; but I rather wish I really had, just to know I really could have. Those on the other side, who have been through the initiation, must on their side have qualms about their vested interest in the gauntlet they have run, about the right to paddle those who come after because I was paddled by those who went before. My own interest in ritual makes me suspect that such primitive logic is more widely operative below the surface than our liberal principles would have us believe, and that it is not altogether a Bad Thing. The conferring of adulthood is bound to be, one way or another, a painful process. The Ph. D. is our profession's way of becoming grown up. Such ways are precious, and deeply built into a society. They are not likely to be changed, in essentials, by the resolutions of ad hoc conferences.

In arriving at its policy statement on the Ph. D., subsequently published in PMLA, our group respected the fact that the doctorate is built into our folkways. We considered the alternative of setting up a formal degree to correspond to the de facto A(ll) B(ut) D(issertation), as this was proposed by Dr. Fredson Bowers in a delightful talk at the NCTE's Thanksgiving meeting in 1964. Professor Bowers recognized that a man has to be called "Doctor" to be a full citizen, so he proposed that ABD's be called "Doctors of Arts," or DA's, initials calculated to put them on a par with District Attorneys! But our conference concluded that even this would be Unamerican. So we concentrated on proposals to revise the requirements for the Ph. D. and came out for a Ph. D. compact model, "just as big inside but shorter."

In our somewhat perplexed deliberations, I am afraid we showed the same kind of ambivalence as the American car-buying public, which wants a compact, yes, but with all the features and, well, a full-sized feel. Our dilemma comes out in the language of our preamble, which starts off bravely, "In view of the activities in which most Ph. D.'s in English engage, we recommend that the degree be regarded as preparation..." The sentence might have gone on to say "as preparation for teaching." But that would have been to propose something that none of us could accept as adequate, for none of us, rightly I think, is ready to settle for a profession where the norm is the man who only teaches. So our brave-beginning sentence goes on: "as preparation both for teaching and scholarship." We were only able to convey the emphasis that concerned us by adding a clause: "and that post-doctoral fellowships be provided for those who are especially concerned with research and writing."

What we wanted to convey, I take it, is that a Ph. D. program can prepare a man to be a teacher and a scholar without including requirements appropriate only for the relatively small group who will be primarily devoted to research and writing. To put it another way, the Ph. D. should be something to go on from, not a be-all-and-end-all. The men who are going to become massive scholars, or athletic, tireless critics, can be trusted to go on without our insisting that everyone master all the knowledge and all the tools required.

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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& we specified that the Ph. D. program, including supervised teaching, should not take longer than four years. We asked that the dissertation "be regarded as a demonstration of scholarly and rhetorical ability." We proposed that only one foreign language be required, but that that one language really be known, with some knowledge of its literature in the original. We spoke for "a reasonable coverage of literature in English with a concentration in one or more areas" --an attempt to counter the assumption that a student can be expected to know all English and American literature. We added that his studies should include different ways of approaching literature: "literary and rhetorical theory, and criticism; bibliographical, textual, and other techniques of scholarship; the nature of language." Finally we urged that the graduate student should not be exploited by having him teach more than is useful for his training as a teacher. We had, of course, no money in hand to make this last goal possible for schools which now depend heavily on such exploitation.

Except in the case of the recommendation about only one foreign language, all of these resolutions were matters of emphasis, and we found ourselves put to it to find language to convey emphasis. About requiring only one foreign language, my impression was that while we agreed to the resolution we also agreed that our individual institutions would differ with the agreement. But we did have a solid consensus about the need for knowing at least one language really well. About the other matters, we were all agreed on saying, in effect, "Let us, for heavens sakes, be reasonable," but "reasonable" covered a number of doubts and unresolved conflicts of attitude.

I think myself that the anxiety which every reduction in requirements can cause may be diminished if we reflect that requirements and standards are two different things. We tend to confuse the two, on the assumption that a school's requirements are an index of the quality of its program and of its successful students. One can test this assumption by asking: is there any graduate program, however exacting, which has not its products who got through successfully and yet remained very limited members of the profession? Our standards, as against our requirements, are very difficult to express--and all-important. What is an acceptable seminar paper? What is an acceptable dissertation? We are guided in such questions by responses so complex that we really can express them only in action, case by case. It is because we know that what really matters is quality of mind that we judge graduate schools by the distinction of the scholars teaching at them--and of the students they regularly attract. Certainly we do not rate graduate schools by totaling up their requirements, the more requirements, the better the school!

No graduate program, surely, can be any better than the minds teaching and being taught in it. But it can, I think, be worse. A program can be worse than the people in it, or destructive or wasteful for some who are in it, if the life of their minds is distorted by unrealistic requirements. Two such "requirements" are: first, that a man should know all of English and American literature and know it all at once; and, second, that a man should write a dissertation that is a contribution to knowledge, or failing that, a dissertation that assembles more exhaustively than ever before all knowledge about something.

Our discussions in New York made it clear that, in point of fact, these traditional impossible demands have very little hold left. Several chairmen from very good places indeed reported that their schools are replacing or have replaced the old, Mandarin-style, one-shot examination by two or more examinations with different purposes, at different stages. There is clearly a widespread tendency to define more clearly a manageable body of knowledge for the student to know--by set lists, for example, including at one place one set list which the student himself supplies. The student is being given more initiative; examinations are being designed to be useful to him as well as to evaluate him. At the same time, programs are or have been organized to make four years the normal time required.

So our resolutions, judged by the practice of some of the very best schools, are not in fact radical (except in the one matter of the language requirement). If they serve to

forestall the creation of archaically demanding requirements by new graduate programs. If anxious to demonstrate their quality in a misconceived way, they will have served one important purpose.

The area of greatest uncertainty, again to judge by our discussions, is the dissertation. One of our number, the editor of a scholarly monograph series, spoke feelingly of the exasperation and boredom he must endure in reading through the many unrevised dissertations which are submitted to him. Apparently our standards of relevance, as we direct dissertations, differ drastically from our standards as we read books and articles. Ideally, many of us assume, the dissertation should have the makings of a book; failing that, it should at least involve as much work as a book. Our group's resolution really does question this assumption. We even went so far as to say that the dissertation "may take the form of a collection of separate studies."

I share unresolved attitudes here which I think are widespread. Most of us tell students to get the dissertation over with and go on from there; yet we half-willingly connive in the students' own tendency to build the thing up into a huge undertaking. We all know the crippled people who as a result have never managed to finish. Frequently in such cases the dissertation has tested other things in the man rather than his scholarly powers. Ours is a profession of former good students who had, many of them, a psychological need of dependence, of affiliation; the dissertation, defined as the enterprise by which one becomes independent, becomes grown up, can easily become an all-or-nothing step which proves insurmountable. At the very time when many men <u>are</u> finding themselves as teachers and members of a college community, the unfinished dissertation can fix in them feelings of inadequacy incongruous with the positive role they play in all other connections.

No change in emphasis can prevent some people from using the dissertation in this neurotic way. But surely a change in emphasis can help many. We should recognize too that, with the big dissertation system, the man who finally succeeds in getting his done is not always blessed by that fact. He may spend the rest of his life within its relatively narrow confines, forced by the system into a premature specialization. On the other side, to conceive the dissertation simply as "a demonstration of scholarly and rhetorical ability", is not going to stop anyone who has it in him from going on, after turning in some chapters to fulfill the requirement, to produce a full scale scholarly work.

About the acceptability of "a collection of separate studies" I feel more doubt: certainly a collection of seminar papers would not do. But one can imagine cases where a theme or problem animates a student's thinking about several otherwise separate literary problems. And we should remember that for many very productive scholars the viable form of expression is not the book but the essay.

Clearly we shall never resolve the anxieties which are built into teaching our subject, including those we go through as we direct student work and wait for light to dawn, or wonder how dimly lit or eccentrically lit a thing we should accept. The trouble is that our study is and can be only partly a discipline. Just as religious discipline, the exercises of piety, put the worshipper in a position to obtain grace, yet cannot guarantee it, so with our students' exercises. We cannot require grace! And yet without it...

To drop this awkwardly high analogy -- one can put our problem by saying that our new graduate students come to us as enthusiastic amateurs and it is for us to make them also professionals. There are mere professionals and true professionals, just as there are mere amateurs and true amateurs. The worst outcome is for an amateur to lose the grace of amateurism and become a mere professional. In so far as our lectures and seminars are animated, finally, by <u>pleasure</u> (and very austere courses can be rooted in such pleasure), we can hope to produce people with professional minds and amateur hearts.